

**Exploring the Relationships Between SEL Implementation, Student Outcomes, and
Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices**

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EDUC-R&P 5508 (Section 0002): Principles and Methods of Research

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July 27, 2025

Introduction and Rationale

In recent years, as the U.S. political landscape has become increasingly polarized, the education system has come under growing scrutiny from policymakers and the public. Social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as one of many flashpoints, with misinformation about its impact on students fueling its association with partisan agendas (Superville, 2024). Critics argue that SEL programs promote progressive ideologies and encroaches on parental rights and their responsibility to teach values and emotions at home (Abrams, 2023). However, when parents are surveyed about the importance of individual social-emotional skills the majority overwhelmingly support instruction in areas like managing emotions, building relationships, and making responsible decisions (Abrams, 2023). The literature shows that SEL is positively linked to student engagement, academic success, and well-being (Cipriano et al., 2024; Durlak et al., 2011). These outcomes are tied to the five core competencies outlined in one of the most widely used frameworks in the United States, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). As polarized rhetoric threatens support for these programs, it becomes even more important to examine not just if SEL matters, but how it is implemented in real classrooms.

Despite the political climate, adoption of SEL programs across the U.S. has continued to grow, with over 80% (up from 73% the previous year) of schools implementing some form of SEL and nearly all states enacting SEL programs in the 2023- 2024 school year (CASEL, 2023). However, as districts, schools, and classrooms implement SEL programs, they face a myriad of challenges to implementation. Some districts offer comprehensive programming aligned with CASEL guidelines, while others only offer minimal or SEL content with little training for educators. This inconsistency raises important questions about the effectiveness of SEL when applied with varying levels of fidelity.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the level of SEL implementation in fifth grade classrooms in Kansas City relates to student outcomes, specifically SEL competencies and engagement. Additionally, the study explores whether culturally responsive teaching practices (CRP) moderate this relationship.

Theoretical Framework

CASEL is the leading organization in the United States that promotes social-emotional learning for students, educators, families, and communities. CASEL's widely adopted framework outlines five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.-a).

This study uses the CASEL framework to define SEL implementation levels at the beginning of the school year and measure student social-emotional development at the end of the school year.

According to CASEL (n.d.-b), consistent, high-quality SEL implementation is linked to improved student outcomes, including stronger competencies and greater engagement. The framework also provides a common structure for assessing implementation quality across classrooms, which supports meaningful comparisons between groups.

Review of Literature

Implementation

Implementation of SEL programs has been shown to vary significantly across schools in the United States (Cipriano et al., 2024). This factor may explain inconsistencies in student outcomes. Teacher training, consistent delivery, and curriculum alignment with frameworks like CASEL are associated with higher quality implementation and this has been linked to positive student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, n.d.-a). In a large-scale meta-analysis, Durlak et

al. (2011) found that programs implemented with fidelity led to significantly better outcomes on measures of student behavior and academic performance, than those with poor or inconsistent delivery.

Engagement/Attendance

In this study, attendance serves as a measurable proxy for student engagement, as it is linked to students' sense of belonging and connection (Pérez-Marco et al., 2025). While engagement is a broad construct, attendance offers a discrete and accessible indicator aligned with SEL outcomes. According to Durlak et al. (2011), SEL programming can strengthen students' connection to school and is indirectly tied to engagement factors like attendance. However, findings are mixed: one urban district study reported no measurable impact (Wang, Daniel, & Elias, 2025). In contrast, Hunt and Henschel (2024), in an ESSA Level II evaluation of Breathe For Change (a program aligned with CASEL's core competencies) found that students with at least one trained teacher showed significant improvements in attendance and reductions in chronic absenteeism. These differences suggest that higher levels of SEL implementation, reflected by teacher training and consistent delivery, may be key to improving attendance.

SEL Core Competencies

The five core competencies outlined by the CASEL serve as the foundation for most SEL programs in schools within the United States and globally (Cipriano et al., 2024; Pérez-Marco et al., 2025; Zhou & McLellan, 2024). Development in the core areas is associated with improvements in academic performance, social behavior, school climate, and reduced anxiety, behavior problems, and substance use (CASEL, n.d.; Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2024). However, how well students develop these skills depends on how effectively the competencies

are taught and practiced. Consistent and high-quality SEL implementation is critical to achieving better outcomes for students, teachers, families, and communities.

Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

Research suggests that equity and cultural responsiveness may influence the effectiveness of SEL implementation, particularly in classrooms serving students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Ramirez et al., 2021). Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) introduced the concept of Transformative SEL, which emphasizes integrating students' cultural identities, histories, and lived experiences within instruction. This approach challenges assumptions that SEL frameworks are universally applicable, as they often reflect white, Western norms. Incorporating culturally responsive practices into SEL instruction has been associated with improved classroom climate and more equitable outcomes (Ramirez et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of cultural relevance in SEL programming. While this study does not examine the effects of culturally responsive practices (CRP) on specific marginalized subgroups, it contributes to the broader conversation by exploring CRP as a classroom-level moderator of SEL effectiveness. Differences in classroom demographics, such as urban versus suburban settings, may provide additional context for interpreting the results.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between the level of classroom-based SEL implementation and fifth grade students' development of social-emotional competencies and school engagement in Kansas City area schools?
2. Do culturally responsive teaching practices moderate the relationship between SEL implementation and student outcomes?

Epistemology

This study is guided primarily by a postpositivist epistemology. This assumes that knowledge can be approximated through empirical observation and structured analysis but also acknowledges that complete objectivity is not possible (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Postpositivism also challenges the notion that observer and observed are fully independent. The paradigm recognizes that findings are shaped by perspective. While this study uses structured statistical methods aligned with postpositivism, I also hold constructivist and interpretivist worldviews because I recognize that meaning is also shaped by context, identity, and human interaction. These combined worldviews inform both my choices of method and the way I intend to interpret findings.

Methodology

This study uses a causal-comparative design to explore differences in student outcomes across classrooms with varying levels of social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation. In this non-experimental study, no variables are manipulated; instead, the researcher analyzes naturally occurring differences between groups. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), this approach requires selecting two groups that differ on a key variable and compares them to one or more dependent variables. Since SEL programming varies across schools and districts, classrooms fall organically into categories such as low, moderate, or high implementation. For the purposes of analysis, these levels will be codified into two categories, low versus moderate to high. This is done to create clearer comparisons and support interpretation given the expected sample size. The dependent variable for social-emotional competencies is measured from a student assessment and will output to five sub-scales that align to the CASEL framework. The second dependent variable, student attendance rates, will be gathered at the classroom level as a

mean class average. Lastly, through a self-report scale, culturally responsive teaching practices will be measured and evaluated for the interaction effect between the independent and dependent variables. Causal-comparative design is a good fit for exploring how naturally occurring classroom-level SEL implementation relates to student outcomes. It also allows space to explore additional instructional factors, such as culturally responsive teaching practices, which may play a role.

Sample and Sampling Methods

For recruitment, schools will be identified using public directories and district websites. Schools that clearly state SEL initiatives or accessible points of contact will be prioritized. Outreach will begin with school leaders and district administrators to request permission and coordinate participation.

Participants will include fifth grade students and their teachers from approximately eight to ten classrooms across public schools in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Fifth grade classrooms were selected because this age represents a critical developmental stage in which social-emotional skills become complex and central to academic and interpersonal success. It is also a transitional year before students enter middle school, making it a valuable point for exploring SEL implementation and its potential impact.

A convenience sampling approach will be used to select entire classrooms as they naturally occur within schools. To reduce potential clustering effects, only one fifth-grade classroom will be selected per participating school. This helps minimize bias introduced by shared schoolwide SEL programming, although district-wide policies may still introduce some bias. Overall, this approach helps preserve variation between sampled units.

This study aims to include classrooms from schools with a range of SEL implementation levels. Initial school selection will be informed by publicly available information, such as district websites and school SEL initiatives. However, final classification into low and moderate to high implementation groups will be based on teacher-completed CASEL rubrics, which provide a more accurate classroom-level view.

The estimated sample size is 15 to 20 classrooms (one per school), depending on recruitment success. While individual student participation will likely range from 150-250 students (depending on class sizes), the unit of analysis is at the classroom level. This sample size should allow for meaningful group comparisons and outcome analysis. Participating schools must serve fifth grade students and agree to share de-identified student attendance data. Teachers will be asked to complete two brief self-report surveys at the beginning of the school year. Students must provide assent and parental consent to participate in one self-report survey at the end of the year. While only one classroom will be sampled per school, some district-level clustering may still occur due to shared programming models across schools. This is acknowledged as a study limitation.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Three primary sources of data will be collected. The first focuses on SEL implementation, the independent variable. This data will be gathered from publicly available school information and supplemented by teacher responses to the CASEL Schoolwide SEL Implementation Rubric, which provides a closer classroom-level view of their practices.

The second data source relates to the hypothesized moderating variable: culturally responsive teaching practices. Teachers will complete the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE), a validated instrument designed to measure teachers' confidence in

using culturally responsive strategies. This scale is grounded in a supporting framework to this study, the Culturally Responsive Teaching framework (Cruz, 2019). The scores will be treated as a continuous variable in regression analyses.

The final source of data will focus on student outcomes, which are the dependent variables. Social-emotional competence will be assessed using the Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ), a self-report tool aligned with CASEL's five core competencies and appropriate for fifth grade students. School engagement will be measured through student attendance rates at the classroom level. Attendance is being used as a proxy for engagement based on research by Pérez-Marco et al. (2025), showing a connection between school climate, belonging, and attendance. The researchers found that students who felt more connected to school reported higher attendance rates, supporting the use of attendance as an indirect indicator of engagement.

All three measures have been validated in educational research. Previous studies support their consistency and construct validity. Original assessment and scoring materials will be used whenever available to help maintain reliability and fidelity. A visual summary of the study steps is provided in Figure A1.

Data Analysis Plan

This study is guided by two primary research questions. The first examines whether the level of SEL implementation is associated with fifth-grade students' social-emotional competence and school engagement. The independent variable is SEL implementation level (categorized as low = 0 and moderate to high = 1), and the dependent variables are student scores on the Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) and attendance rates.

To address these questions, multiple regression (using an interaction term) will be used to examine the relationship between SEL implementation and each outcome separately, and to test whether culturally responsive teaching practices moderate that relationship. According to Creswell & Gutterman (2019), multiple regression allows researchers to examine the combined relationship between multiple independent variables on a single dependent variable. When an interaction term is included, created by multiplying two variables together (e.g., SEL Implementation and CRPSE scores), researchers can test the resulting effect, or interaction effect, of the moderating variable.

In this study, CRP will be treated as a continuous moderator based on scores from the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale. SEL implementation is the primary predictor, and an interaction term (SEL x CRP) will be included to examine moderation outcomes. Several separate regression models will be run. The first will predict SEL competencies (via the SECQ) and the second will predict student engagement (via attendance rates). Note that the first model will be run for each of the five sub-scale scores (continuous variables) on the SECQ rather than a single composite score. These sub-scales correlate to the five CASEL framework competencies. Attendance rates will be gathered at the classroom level and collected as a mean average and percentage continuous variable. Before running analyses, key statistical assumptions such as normality, linearity, and independence will be checked to ensure validity of results. A visual overview of the study's conceptual model and variable relationships is provided in Figure A2

The data will be analyzed using Jamovi, a free and open-source statistical analysis tool that supports multiple regression modeling and interaction testing. This platform was chosen for its accessibility and ease of use.

For each model, the analysis will include the main effects of SEL implementation and CRPSE, as well as the interaction term (SEL x CRPSE). A statistically significant interaction term will suggest that culturally responsive teaching practices moderate the relationship between SEL implementation and student outcomes. The results will be interpreted by reviewing p-values to assess statistical significance and by examining the direction of the relationships. For example, whether higher levels of SEL implementation are associated with increases or decreases in student outcomes. I will also consider how much of the variation in outcomes is explained by the predictors. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), this overall strength of association can be interpreted as an effect size. These interpretations will help clarify whether and how SEL implementation and culturally responsive practices meaningfully impact student development and engagement.

Researcher Positionality

As a former educator and current counseling student with a background in design, I bring both personal and professional experience to this topic. I identify as a first-generation Mexican American and am invested in how SEL promotes student wellbeing and how culturally responsive practices support student engagement. While I use structured, quantitative methods in this study, I acknowledge that my worldview is shaped by my lived experiences, values, and training. This will influence how I interpret and communicate my findings. I hold a belief that data should be used to promote equity and that numbers help contextualize the lived experiences of students and educators.

Communication of Results

The results of this study will be communicated in a formal research report. This will include tables, visuals, and narrative descriptions of the findings. In addition to statistical

outcomes, I will present results with an emphasis on clear and practical interpretation. This approach supports educators, school leaders, and parents interested in SEL implementation and equity by helping them use the data meaningfully to inform policy, programming, and practice.. Leveraging my background as a visual designer, process diagrams, conceptual models, and simple charts may be used to enhance accessibility. Limitations will also be clearly acknowledged, and practical implications will be surfaced. If appropriate, I plan to share a summary version in the form of a research brief with local educators or community partners.

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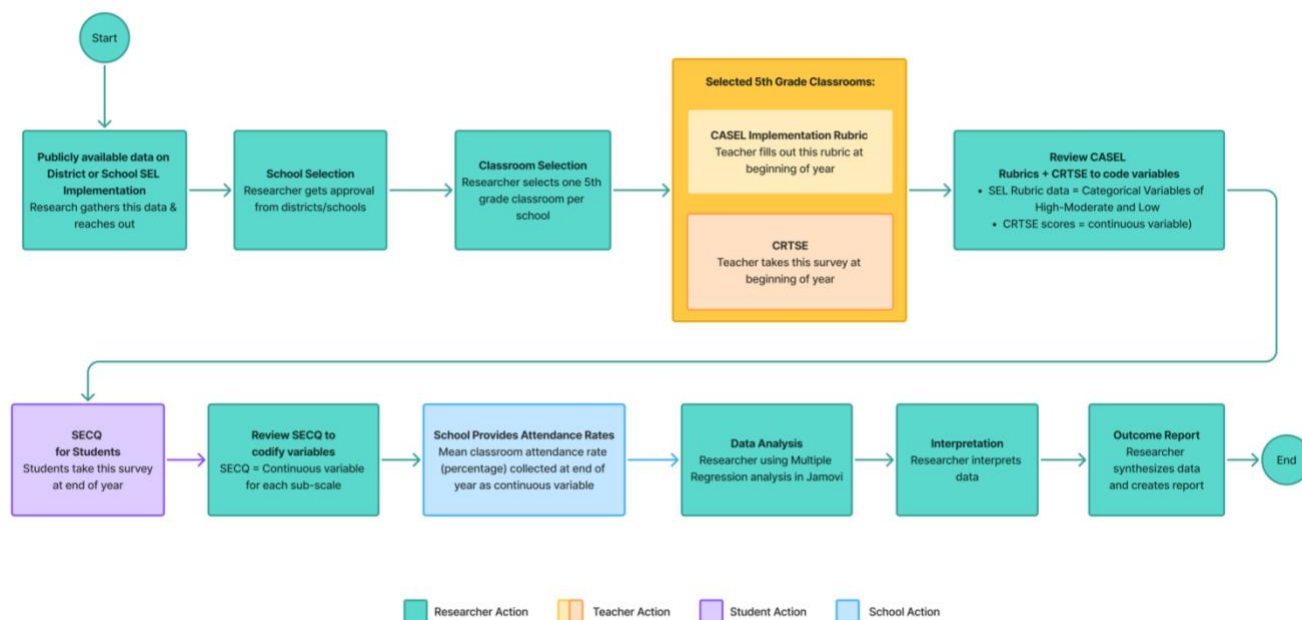
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Appendix

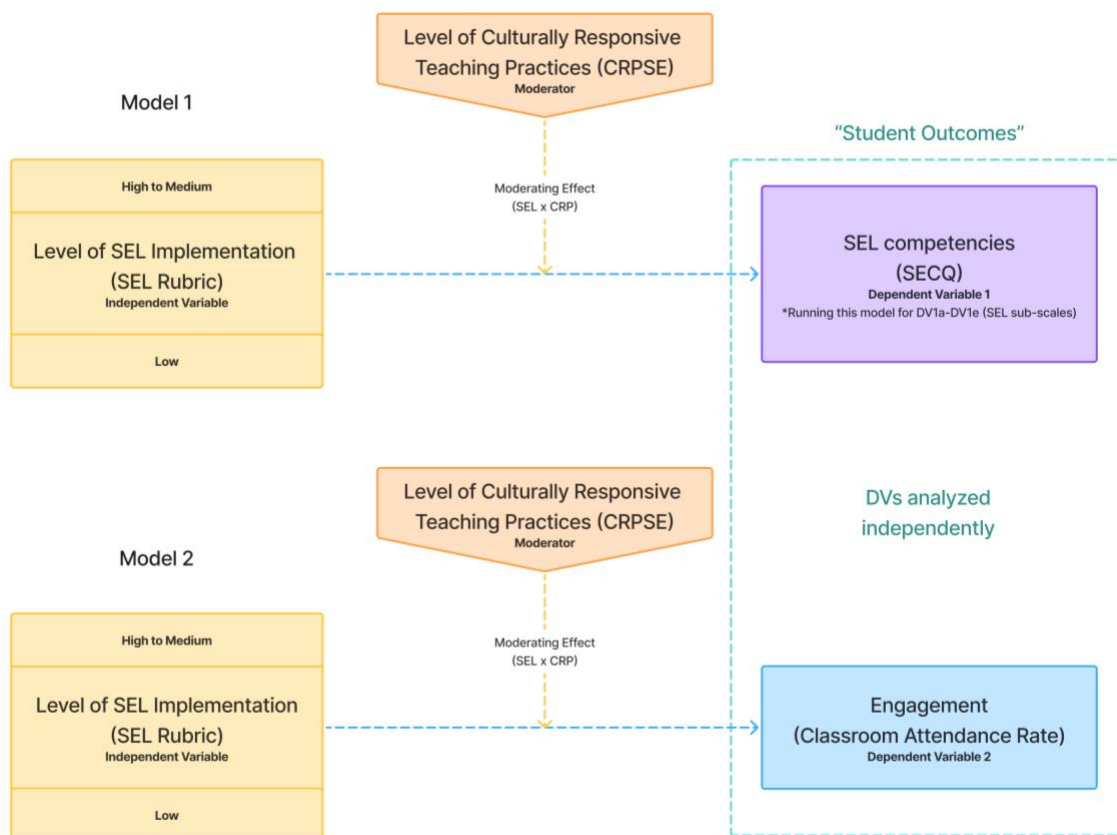
Study Design Visual Diagrams

Figure A1

Study Overflow Diagram



Note. Overview of data collection and analysis process. Color-coded by stakeholder action (researcher, teacher, student, school).

Figure A2*Moderated Multiple Regression Models*

Note: Two models tested independently using moderated multiple regression: Model 1 (SEL × CRP predicting SEL competencies across five sub-scales) and Model 2 (SEL × CRP predicting classroom engagement).